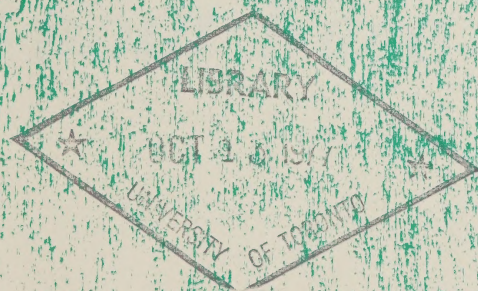


CAZØN
SD 90
77A13

Acquisition
Publication

About Face



*towards a
positive image
of housewives*

CA20N

SD 90

77A13

Written by Penney Kome
Drawings by Tina Holdcroft
Researched by Marianne Pringle

Published by
The Ontario Status of Women Council
Ontario Secretariat for Social Development
801 Bay St. 3rd Floor, Toronto, Ontario.
1977

About Face

*towards a
positive image
of housewives*

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY
READING ROOM LOAN

CALL NUMBER

CA27N
SD 90
71A13

AUTHOR

TITLE

VOLUME

①

27 7 85

NAME

ADDRESS

C. BURTON

71-104 Valeywoods

Don Mills

DATE

NON-REGISTERED READER


IDENTIFICATION CHECKED

TORONTO TELEPHONE NUMBER

442-0046

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
WHO IS A HOUSEWIFE?	3
A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOUSEWIFERY	4
RESOLVED: THAT HOUSEWORK HAS BEEN INDUSTRIALIZED	15
RESOLVED: THAT CHILDCARE HAS BEEN PROFESSIONALIZED	16
SUMMING UP: SO MUCH FOR TRADITION	17
THE MODERN HOUSEWIFE: JOB DESCRIPTION	19
WHO BENEFITS FROM ALL THIS FREE WORK?	25
SUMMING UP: JOB DUTIES	26
HOW MODERN WOMEN FIT HOMEMAKING INTO THEIR LIVES	28
OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS	32
DUAL ROLES — DUAL JOBS?	35
SUMMING UP: OCCUPATION HOUSEWIFE	40



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
University of Toronto

<https://archive.org/details/31761115464877>



INTRODUCTION

The term "housewife" has become a label worn, willingly or not, by 4.5 million Canadian women who work in their own homes. Certain social assumptions about housewives are common, and not all of these myths are flattering. Usually a woman who has chosen to stay home and look after the children is embarrassed when someone asks, "What do you do?" "Me?" she's likely to reply, "Oh, I'm just a housewife." Think how funny it would sound if someone said, "Hi, I'm just an engineer." Or: "Meet Joan Brown, she's just a lawyer."

Public, professionals, and women themselves are suddenly beginning to realize that "housewife" is not an identity, but an occupation. All sorts of women (and some men) carry on the job of homemaking, including those more often labelled "working women." Let's strip away all emotional appeals to a woman's duty to her family or her "natural place in the home", and assess the actual work involved in running a household. Fantastic changes have occurred in the Canadian home since the turn of the century,

but most people's ideas about family roles, child-raising, and housework, haven't kept pace.

This booklet is intended to get you thinking about housework, and about the people who stay home to do it. If you are a housewife, we hope you will come away feeling pleased and a little surprised by realizing your own worth. If you are young and intend to raise a family, we hope to help you plan your life realistically. If you are a person who has never really done much housework — or thought about it — we hope to shake up your thinking so that you can never again take housework for granted.

"How would I describe myself? It'll sound terrible — just a housewife. (Laughs). It's true. What is a housewife? You don't have to have any special talents. I don't have any.

"First thing I do in the morning is come in the kitchen and have a cigarette. Then I'll put the coffee on and whatever else we're gonna have for breakfast: bacon and eggs, sausage, waffles, toast, whatever. Then I'll make one lunch for young Bob — when school's on, I'll pack more — and I get them off to work. I'll usually throw a load of clothes in the washer while I'm waiting for the next batch to get up out of bed, and carry on from there. It's nothing, really . . .

"I'll never say I'm really a good mother until I see the way they all turn out. So far they've done fine. I had somebody tell me in the hospital that I must have done a good job of raising them. I just went along from day to day and they turned out all right . . .

"Somebody who goes out and works for a living is more important than somebody who doesn't. What they do is very important in the business world. What I do is only important to five people. I don't like putting a housewife down, but everybody has done it for so long. It's the sort of the thing you do. Deep down, I feel what I'm doing is important. But you just hate to say it, because what are you? Just a housewife? (Laughs).

"I love being a housewife. Maybe that's why I feel so guilty. I shouldn't be happy doing what I'm doing. (Laughs). Maybe you're not supposed to be having fun. I never looked on it as a duty."

— from *Working* by Studs Terkel (1972, Pantheon Books) quoting Therese Carter, "Just a Housewife"

"There is some evidence that non-employed housewives experience more strain than 'working women', e.g., their suicide rates are higher and they are more prone to divorce. It seems to me that the internal contradictions inherent in the housewife/mother roles have become such that they provide sufficient explanation for the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the sixties. Previous explanations for the emergence of this major social movement have focussed on ideological changes or specific political events. Neither one, however, can explain why women's groups started in all highly industrialized countries in the middle sixties. To explain their emergence by changes in the specific female roles of housewife and mother which were occasioned through an interplay of demographic and technological forces means to ground the movements in structural changes rather than ideological changes . . ."

— from: "The Industrialization of Housework"
by Margrit Eichler; paper presented at National Council for Family Relations meetings, 1976

WHO IS A HOUSEWIFE?

Contrary to the term, a housewife is not a woman married to a house. Homemakers usually are female, and they make up the largest single occupational group in Canada. However, lifestyles and working conditions vary by a family's income level, their geographic locations, the number of their children, and their personal values. Every household is different.

Some few generalizations may still be drawn. In the interests of defining our terms, we will assume that the typical housewife is a married woman who stays home to take care of the home and

children while her husband earns the family income in the workforce. Usually, she neither draws a personal paycheque nor contributes money to the family purse; she receives food, shelter and clothing in a direct trade for her services.

In a couple with this arrangement, the woman is often called a "traditional" housewife. For some reason, probably lack of objective scientific study, people seem unaware that machines have transformed homemaking as much as all other modern occupations. We shall show that household tasks have changed so much in this century (as well as the attitudes towards them), that this seemingly traditional occupation is in fact a brand-new job.

People interested in improving the public image of the job have often suggested that the term "housewife" be replaced by "homemaker" or "houseworker". Both these terms, it is felt, describe the job more accurately. For our purposes, all three will be used interchangeably, along with the awkward but precise "women who work in the home."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOUSEWIFERY

"Women in my grandmother's time made everything they needed. Their ideas were different. The outside was a man's world, the home was a woman's world. Today we don't know where we belong."

— housewife quoted by Helen Lopata in her book, *Occupation: Housewife* (NY Oxford Press '71, pp. 130-1)

1900

Housework was a complicated and arduous business at the turn of the century. Women had to manage without electricity, with few household appliances and poor plumbing and heating systems. In each household, the housewife was directly and obviously responsible for a great many necessities. She grew, gathered, butchered, dried, preserved, and stored most of the food, and also made up other goods like soap, candles, and clothes. In fact, a person not attached to a household had trouble finding fresh-baked bread or a hot meal or a clean and mended shirt. No one doubted then, at the turn of

the century, that what a housewife did in her home was good honest work.

As Ontario industrialized, it was common practice for a husband to hand his entire salary over to his wife to manage. As the children began to work, they too gave the homemaker their wages for room and board. To supplement this income, she could also take in washing, sewing, or lodgers. If she somehow managed to squirrel away a little money for herself, she could keep it (in Ontario, after the Married Women's Property Act of 1872, she had the right to her own possessions).

Single females didn't have many occupations from which to choose. A girl wishing to leave her family home or earn some board money to pay her mother, often found work as a domestic servant. A wave of immigration, occurring between 1886 and the First World War, brought a large supply of cheap servants for Canadian households. However, domestic work was seldom considered a lifetime career, but only a preparation for marriage.

"The life of the average woman is divided generally into periods of work, that of paid employment, and that of homemaking. No adequate scheme of training for girls can fail to take account of this fact . . . *Lack of training in homemaking is probably the greatest drawback which a girl in paid employment can have.*"

— from the *Canadian Girl at Work*, published by the Ontario Ministry of Education, 1916, reprinted in *Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930*.

An important although subtle shift of power was also occurring at about this time. As workers' earnings (mostly male), rose above subsistence levels, men began taking charge of the family income. Where before, a man had handed over his entire earnings, now he began giving the housewife an allowance for necessities, and keeping the remainder himself. Wives no longer knew how much money their husbands earned, and began to lose their say in family finances.

THE SUFFRAGISTS

Simultaneously, housewives were drawn into public life because of

their family responsibilities. Government regulations began intruding into the home. A new “spirit of national motherhood” was called for, encouraging mothers to extend their maternal devotion to community affairs. When governments started to tell women how to raise their children, women suddenly got interested in politics.

“It is on this account that women today say to the governments of the world . . . It is you today who determine the nature of the air which we breathe, of the food which we eat, of the clothing which we wear. It is you who determine when, and how long, and what our children are to be taught, and what their prospects as future wage-earners are to be . . . It is you who by granting or refusing pensions to the mothers of young children can preserve or destroy the fatherless home . . . And since all of these matters strike at the very heart strings of all the mothers of all nations, we shall not rest until we have secured all the power vested in the ballot.”

— from *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*,
p. xiii (U. of T. Press, 1950, 1974)
Sonia Lethes, address to the National Council
of Women, Halifax, 1913

The suffragists and other pioneers in the early struggle for women’s rights held the wife-mother role in such high regard that, they felt, it could no longer be confined to the home. They believed that since women did such a great job running their households, they should apply their talents to helping run the country as well.

Women won the right to vote in Ontario elections in 1917, and in federal elections the following year. The ominous predictions made by the anti-suffragists did not come true. Voting did not prevent women from bearing children, keeping house, or getting dinner ready on time. On the surface, life continued as usual. But already feminist thinkers were beginning to question the whole social structure.

“If men had to bear the pain and weariness of childbearing, in addition to the unending labours of housework and caring for children, for one year, at the end of that time there would

be a perfect system of co-operation and labour-saving devices in operation, for men have not the genius for martyrdom that women have . . . No man tries to do everything the way women do. No man aspires to making his own clothes, cleaning his own office, pressing his own suits, or even cleaning his own shoes. All these things he is quite willing to let people do for him, while he goes ahead and does his work . . .

“On the other hand, the home is the most haphazard institution we have . . . In each of the homes there is a little bit of washing done, a little dress-making, a little butter-making, a little baking, a little ironing going on, and it is all by hand-power, which is the most expensive power known.”

— Nellie McClung, *In Times Like These*, 1915
(U. of T. Press 1972, 1974, pp. 113-6)

WORLD WAR I

The First World War brought changes which affected Canadians as much as women winning the vote. With the men overseas fighting, someone had to take over the industrial and farming jobs. No one then suggested that factory or other jobs involving heavy machinery were “unladylike”; or that women should not receive pay cheques for the work they did. For four years the public wholeheartedly supported the participation of women in the labour force. Forgotten were the supposedly terrible consequences for the children of “working mothers”.

But the old myths were revived when the end of the war brought all the men home to flood the job market. Pressure was openly applied to force women out of the labour force. The following bulletin was handed out to female employees at the end of the war:

“To women workers—

Are you working for love . . .
Or for money?

Are you holding a job you do not need?

Perhaps you have a husband well able to support you and a comfortable home?

You took a job during the war to help meet the shortage of labour.

You have 'made good' and you want to go on working.

But the war is over and conditions have changed.

There is no longer a shortage of labour. On the contrary, Ontario is faced by a serious situation due to the number of men unemployed.

This number is being increased daily by returning soldiers.

They must have work. The pains and dangers they have endured in our defence give them the right to expect it.

Do you feel justified in holding a job which could be filled by a man who has not only himself to support, but a wife and family as well?

Think it over."

— from *Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930*, p. 288

Having been patted on the head and sent home, women returned to find homemaking was not the same occupation it had been in 1914. Household appliances, canned foods, consumer goods, and expanded service industries (such as laundries and bakeries), all helped to make housework easier. "Efficiency" was the watchword of a society poised to leap into the technological age.

1920

The "new woman" of the 1920's treated housework as a necessary evil, a job to be done with as little fuss and bother as possible.

The educated woman of the 1920's wanted to try her hand at other jobs too. Women were graduating from universities now. They were breaking into such previously male professions as law, medicine, business, journalism, and politics. An element of choice had finally entered the lives of a small but growing number of women, who rejected full-time housekeeping in favour of a wider range of activities. Margaret Fairley caused quite a stir in 1920 with her suggestions that a woman could have more than a clean house and well-fed children; but her views gained popularity as the decade unfolded. Women's writings in the 1920's showed an eagerness for full and active lives.

“In the first place, housewives attempt far too much . . . Here many are very foolish. If there is not much help available, big sections of unnecessary work could be cut out — most of the sewing, all of the canning, much of the cooking. Why not do as little of these things as possible instead of as much? If there is any margin of income, why not spend it on buying leisure? If people to cook and wash in the house are hard to come by, why not use the services which they are willing to give in bakery and laundry? If the opportunity to read and talk is really desired, there must be the readiness to sacrifice a little money, a little reputation for housewifeliness, and a little of the special flavour of homemade jam.”

— Margaret Fairley in *The Canadian Forum*
December 1920 (Reprint Sept '75, p. 31)

“ . . . We sometimes look askance when some young woman whose work once showed promise sinks quietly beneath the waves of matrimony. ‘Spineless’, we think secretly, and we feel perhaps a bit superior that we are single and splendidly carving out our lives. Little do we guess the struggle that has gone on under our eyes before she went down for the last time. She has not advertised it. When she found her strength unequal to two jobs, she gave up the least (sic) important and died from the professional world with no one to blow *Last Post* over her but a family and few close friends. And for the rest of her life she will probably hear this or that complacent male with half her brains chortle out the list of men’s achievements with the timeworn comment, ‘What have you women done that can equal this?’”

— Chatelaine, July 1928



THE DEPRESSION

This lively discussion of women's roles was brief, however, brought to a dramatic end with the severe depression of the 1930's. As the unemployment rate soared, men and women alike lost their jobs; but women were usually laid off first. The 1920's talk of "buying leisure with any margin of income" went out the door, along with most women's ambitions for careers. Every member of the family had to scrape and scrimp. Every bit and scrap of food had to be used, or often extended. Keeping a family together under the incredible stresses of the time was a full-time job. Women handled this job without the servants, services, or expensive appliances supplied in earlier decades.

The Dirty Thirties did bring public attention to one so-called "women's issue": family planning. The relationship between poverty and over-fertility became too glaringly obvious to be ignored.

"The hero of the Canadian birth control movement is undoubtedly A. F. Kaufman, of Kitchener, Ontario, an industrialist engaged in the manufacture of rubber footwear.

In 1929, Kaufman was moved by the plight of his workers' struggle to cope with excess fertility and he set up birth-control services to help them. His activities became known outside the walls of his plant, and the demand for similar help all across the country led to the establishment of the Parents' Information Bureau in 1930. He ultimately employed fifty part-time home visitors all across Canada. One of them was Miss Dorothea Palmer, who worked in Eastview, a suburb of Ottawa. Her subsequent trial for contravening the Criminal Code made history in 1936-37."

— from *Compulsory Parenthood*
by Wendell Watters, M.D.

(McClelland & Stewart, 1976, p. 122)

By the time Magistrate Clayton ruled in 1937, that Dorothea Palmer had been serving the public interest in informing women about birth control, family planning activists were already established in Hamilton, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Brant County. Technically, dispensing the information did not become legal until the 1969 amendment to the Criminal Code; but there was never again such a trial in Canada.

WORLD WAR II

The Depression ended with the coming of the Second World War. The economy picked up, the armies packed the men off to war, and women began packing themselves lunches again, for work at the war plant. While housewives had been coerced into leaving the labour force after the earlier war, they were now cajoled into returning. The following advertisement was placed in the Maclean's magazine of February 15, 1944, by the John Labatt Company of London, Ontario.

Isn't it the Truth?

Alice: Sorry, Jane, bridge is out as far as I'm concerned.
I'm doing part-time work in a war plant.

Jane: Alice, you're not! How perfectly splendid!
But is it worth it?

Alice: What do you mean is it worth it? It's helping the war effort
and that's enough for me.

Jane: Yes, but by the time you've paid the tax is there much left?

Alice: Sure there is, but I'm not doing this for money alone.
And anyway, I put all my earnings into war savings!

Jane: You make me feel ashamed. Can I get a job at your plant?

By 1943, the old biological myths about female frailty and intellectual weakness had been disproved by the achievements of women in all fields. This time when the boys came marching home, women were less willing to give up their careers simply because someone told them to. Again, after the war, more families began sending their daughters to co-educational universities. Even if they were there only to catch a better class of husband, more intelligent young women than ever before were attending college; and some even — shocking! — obtained diaphragms. Finally, religious injunctions against contraception were turning many women away from the church; hence, away from the religious dogma that had formerly kept them safely in the kitchen and nursery.

1950

Women as a labour force, and as individuals, were showing an independence that threatened to shake up the whole social system. In response came a surge of quasi-Freudian propaganda, insinuating snidely that there was something wrong and sick about a woman who aspired to anything other than happy homemaking. While Freudianism had been a plaything of the intelligensia since the 1920's, now it was dispensed wholesale. The attack was two-pronged.

First, the pundits proclaimed as fact Freud's speculations that women were naturally inferior, passive, helpless creatures who were lucky if they could achieve service to one man or family. Women who desired a career or higher education, or who dreamed of independence, were described as sick, unhappy, and unfeminine. The kindest thing was to cure them of their neurotic desire for equality with men. This attitude undercut women's self-confidence.

Freud also, in delving into his neurotic patients' childhoods, discovered that many had had poor relationships with their mothers. From this discovery flowed an abundance of bad news. Formerly, children had been widely regarded as almost-animals, to be trained and restrained any way possible (even forcibly), until

they chose to turn into human beings. Now this image shifted, to one of pure-hearted superhumans, who were unfortunately corrupted by the mothers — too young to defend themselves! Any time a child threw a tantrum, or disobeyed, or lied, or stole, (according to this school) it was because Mother had failed her sacred duty.

The heavy guilt lavished on housewives served to keep them in their homes. They read the enormously popular child psychology books and worried that they were inadequate mothers. They watched daytime television while they ironed their husband's shorts, and worried about yellow waxy build-up. They subscribed to "women's" magazines, and worried about satisfying their husbands sexually.

1960

With all the best intentions, then, women succumbed to the Feminine Mystique so graphically described by Betty Friedan in her 1963 book, by that name. But then, once again, education and a little affluence led women to realize how hypocritical were the social forces constantly urging them to selflessness and sacrifice. With fewer children, and household appliances to ease the workload, they had time to think about their college degrees gathering dust. As volunteer workers, they sometimes encountered crying social wrongs. Divorce became increasingly common, if not popular; and some women had their noses rubbed in antiquated and unfair family laws.

The surge of feminism this time was angrier than ever before. Some of the more militant leaders were quite willing to throw out bathwater, baby, marriage bed, and husbands too — if it would help them get their hands on a piece of the action. However, being a Crusader is almost as lonely as being an Angel of the Home. Most women still want husband and family, but they also want more from life.

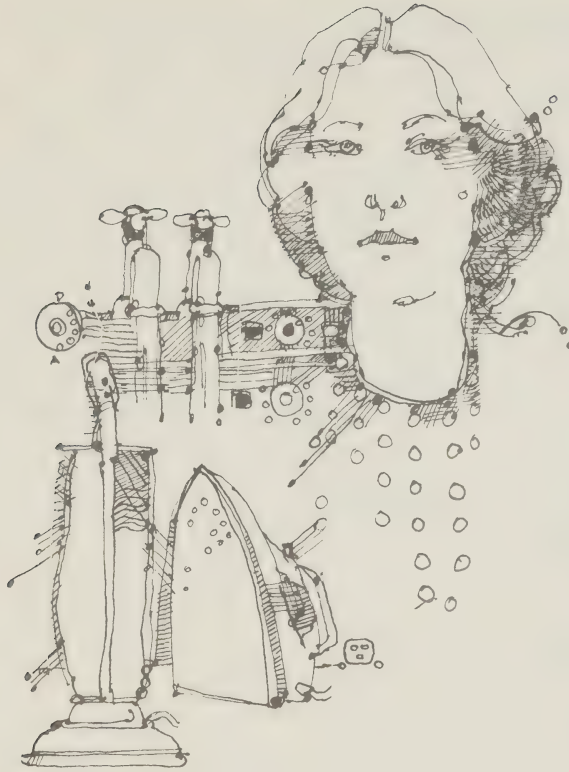
1970

Ironically, the guilt-ridden role of the 1950's is the usual public image of the so-called "traditional housewife." Only the trappings of tradition remain, in the wedding ceremony. Forgotten is the dignity

of work in the home. Overlooked is the vital economic role of homemaking.

Since the Second World War, women have been spoonfed pap and propaganda by advertisers, educators, entertainment and news media. The result is that everyone (spouses, children, society) gets hurt, because people have unrealistic expectations of marriage. Some public leaders have opinioned that the current turmoil was stirred up by the women's movement. Feminists assert the contrary, that women became political because the current system actually disrupts families by placing too much stress on the wife-and-mother role. Halfway between the selflessness to which clergy and social leaders exhort housewives, and the selfishness of which feminists are often accused, is a place called healthy self-interest. It is this point that housewives must have the freedom of choice to define for themselves.

So here we are, at a point of ambivalence. Whither the housewife? Although she still stays home with the children, her role today is as different from her great-grandmothers' as a self-developing snapshot from a painted portrait. Now is a fine time to re-evaluate the occupation of homemaking, its demands and rewards; and plan how the duties can best be handled to give women who work in the home full credit and full opportunity in their work.



RESOLVED: THAT HOUSEWORK HAS BEEN INDUSTRIALIZED

We usually think of “industrialization” as a factory process, but if we take it to mean merely that machines have taken over tasks formerly done by hand, then it is clear that keeping house is now an industrial job. Homemakers currently provide services instead of products (service industries being the hallmark of modern technology). Every product and service which was available only from a housewife in 1900, now may be purchased from restaurants, clothing stores, laundries, groceries, etc. As well, most Ontario homes now have their own work-saving devices, as this chart shows:

Percentages of Canadian Households with Certain Equipment, 1948-1975

ITEM	1948	1953	1958	1963	1968	1975
Hot and cold running water	—	62.57	73.50	84.86	90.97	96.73
Gas or electric stove	48.49	62.73	76.66	87.24	94.03	98.33
Mechanical refrigerator	29.26	66.33	86.24	94.20	97.44	99.25
Home freezer	—	2.22	8.17	17.66	29.16	41.83
Electric washing machine	59.21	76.38	84.28	86.81	83.57	76.86
Vacuum cleaner	32.02	48.01	60.94	72.45	—	86.54
Electric sewing machine	—	23.43	36.30	49.03	—	65.43
Gas or electric clothes dryer	—	—	—	21.60	36.79	51.62
Automatic dishwasher	—	—	—	2.08	5.08	15.20
Floor polisher	—	—	—	—	55.01	

—chart from *The Industrialization of Housework* by Margrit Eichler, figures drawn from Dominion Bureau of Statistics.

RESOLVED: THAT CHILDCARE HAS BEEN PROFESSIONALIZED

"Women to be normally feminine must bear and raise children, yet the status that falls to women as mothers is very low and the supports provided by the social system for raising children are negligible. Mothers are told to act by instinct. That they will know instinctively the best way to raise children. This very emphasis on instinct sets women off from the rest of society's jobs for which it is assumed that people must be trained. It also implies that women operate as mothers on a more primitive level than men or women in other occupations."

— from *Women Look at Psychiatry* by Dorothy E. Smith & Sara David, essay “Women, Sex Role Stereotypes & Mental Health: Catch 22” by Meredith Kimball (Press Gang Publishers, 1975)

If machines have made the physical burden of housekeeping easier, the Technological Age has made child-raising more difficult. Nowadays, a young mother often comes from a small family (of 2 or 3 children, born close together) and lacks the in-home training of caring for younger siblings. Commonly, she's hundreds of miles from near-relatives who could give guidance or take over care sometimes and give her a break. She depends on books and visits with professionals (medical and educational) to guide her in childcare. With machines to handle so much of the housework, she tends to regard mothering as her major duty, and gives each child lots of personal attention. Indeed, she strives to maintain a professional standard of quality care which was quite unimaginable to her great-grandmother. Her major aids in the task are public school and TV, since the supply of good cheap daycare has lagged far behind the demand.

Two subtle changes have also conspired against the homemaker's peace of mind. First, the modern, urban and suburban environments are actually becoming child-hostile. There are very few places in any city where a child can safely play unattended. Children living in high-rise apartments are especially disadvantaged, having real difficulty in just going outside to play. Heavy traffic is a hazard even to rural children, if they must use the roads to get to school or a playground.

Another major complication is our social practice of keeping teenagers in the parental home (to facilitate completing their education) long past the age when adolescents of previous generations would have joined the workforce. If there is anything that adolescents *don't like*, it is being dependent. Prolonging teenagers' emotional, legal, and financial dependence makes the youngsters more difficult to handle — and the housewife's job more stressful.

Summing Up: So Much for Tradition

Reviewing history shows that the homemaking role has changed

dramatically since the days in which we fondly imagine our traditional concept to be rooted. Where once a housewife directly produced the food her family ate and the clothes they wore, now she buys these commodities with the family income. As machines have taken over the production and upkeep that were once her major tasks, she has been encouraged to consider mothering as a full-time occupation. Meanwhile, a heavy load of guilt has been laid on her, making her personally responsible for her family's welfare and (especially) for her children's development.

Two historical facts need pointing out. Firstly, every time since 1900 that social conditions have allowed women some leisure and education, the women's movement has spontaneously revived. Secondly, two world wars have proven firmly how much our economy relies on housewives as a cheap, mobile, expendable labour force.

Since most other workers now receive salaries, the apparently unpaid housewife is in a poor bargaining position in the workforce. Actually, a homemaker is paid for her services. True, she receives only room and board, and maybe a small allowance for herself. Yet she does work for her living, although she is not self-supporting. This awkward situation results because the services a housewife provides her husband (who supports her) are now replaceable in the marketplace. The service she provides the society, in raising and training the future generation, is not replaceable.



The Modern Housewife: Job Description

“Housewifery is undoubtedly work in every sense of the word, but it is work which shows several structural anomalies. For instance, it has no fixed working hours (but then, neither do farmers, artists, or academics). There is no licensing in this country which admits you to the ranks of a housewife (but neither do you need a license for unskilled work). There is no generally accepted work procedure although there is a sizeable literature which discusses the ‘right’ way of doing different aspects of housework such as cooking, child-raising, decorating, gardening, even cleaning, freezing, etc. Artists are in a similar position. These anomalies are therefore anomalies that are shared by other

occupations whose occupational status is undoubted.”

— from *The Prestige of the Occupation Housewife*
by Margrit Eichler

In theory, when freely chosen, homemaking provides ideal working conditions. You can choose your own tasks and your own hours. You can take time for a second cup of coffee, or a favourite TV show. Your boss is friendly, and you have total authority over your subordinates (the children). Life is leisurely, with plenty of time to enjoy the children and smell the flowers.

In practice — well, in practice, most housewives drive themselves too hard. Studies show that the average Canadian housewife works longer hours than most people in regular employment. She's on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. She may put her feet up and read when the baby's napping, but she also leaves her bed when the infant wails at night — without drawing overtime pay.

Many homemakers would protest putting a dollar value on their work, saying that a labour of love is priceless. It's true that for some good deeds there's no greater reward than a loving smile or a delighted laugh. But it's also true that our society undervalues all women's work, just because housework is apparently unpaid. There is a wide-spread myth in our culture that an important job is always highly-paid. By this thinking, an unpaid job is not important at all, right?

Wrong. People who believe housework is unimportant have got it all backwards. That's like saying we're raising children to take over industry, instead of realizing that we're holding this society *in trust* for the youngsters. Children are our most precious natural resource, remember. Every adult in our society has a personal interest in making sure that our children grow up healthy and happy. In a people-oriented culture, childcare would be a well-paid, high-status job.

“In a money culture like ours it's hard to get past the dollar signs. Many a woman has found new respect even from her own husband and children by going back to the same field she quit to wait on them. But to have driven a child to the emergency room in time to avoid a catastrophe is more important than all those papers office workers are pushing

around — and you did it without pay. If you changed this into business language you would have been ‘responding to an emergency’, ‘able to remain cool under pressure’, ‘capable of leadership’, ‘able to help and direct others’ — valuable assets that can be translated into cold hard cash.”

— from *Women’s Work Book*, by Karin Abarbanel and Gonnie McClung Siegel
(Information House Books, 1975)

Let’s try to compromise between real and ideal. While keeping in mind that many housewives *prefer* to work in the home, at least while the children are young, let’s analyze homemaking as if it were just another job. A modern houseworker wears many hats, including:

BUSINESS MANAGER: It’s often said that the housewife is the hub of her family’s activities. Good old Mom is always there when she’s needed — and she’s always needed. She keeps count of household supplies, from linen to notepaper. If anything is lost in the house, she can find it. She plans appointments and social occasions, and sees that everyone gets there on time and in the right clothes. She manages the family budget, constantly stretching it to cover unplanned expenses. She maintains and arranges for repair of household appliances and machines. Yet, somehow, she’s always right by the telephone, ready to take messages or answer sudden calls of distress.

NURSEMAID/TEACHER: An infant needs a lot of physical care; but an infant and say, a 3-year-old, need more than twice as much; because the toddler is old enough to create mischief. Children are brimming over with curiosity, full of questions. Directing this energy takes a lively spirit and an inventive mind. As the axiom has it, the best teaching is by example. If the person who usually has care of the child encourages questions, and either answers them or shows how to find the answers, the child begins to enjoy learning. Children also absorb attitudes and ethics from their care-takers, even without (or despite) any formal instruction. Finally, childcare is physically demanding, as can be confirmed by anyone who has ever lugged a load of wet diapers, or carried home a 6-year-old kicking and screaming.

COOK/DIETITIAN: Mothers who stay at home usually pride themselves on their home-cooked meals. They go to extra effort to provide wholesome, nourishing food to keep their families healthy. They plan their menus carefully, always keeping the budget in mind, and simmer their sauces for hours. Often these days, one member of the family needs a special diet, so the housewife may cook more than one meal for one sitting.

PRACTICAL NURSE: Diaper rash, sore throats, skinned knees, croup, sprains, cuts, stomach flu, diarrhea, high fevers, and other disasters too numerous to mention all are part of growing up. Caring for someone afflicted with one or more of these problems (or God forbid, the whole family) calls for special skills and special patience. Here again a homemaker keeps her family healthy, by remembering medical histories and being mindful of early symptoms. Also, the housewife sometimes assumes responsibility for caring for aged or ill parents and grandparents.

INTERIOR DÉCORATOR: A young couple may spend years saving and shopping around to furnish their home, but it's a sure bet that most of the furniture will not survive their family's happy childhoods. Most households change appearance as the family's needs change. For instance, babies need squeaky-clean floors to crawl on; but that easily-cleanable tile thunders noisily under a horde of ten-year-olds. Again, a home must be kidproofed for a toddler, where an older child might be more careful of plants and ornaments. Many homemakers go beyond these necessary changes, and add their own personal handcrafted touches to their homes.

LAUNDERER/MENDER: We're no longer pounding clothes clean on river rocks, but homemakers are carrying bigger laundry baskets than ever before, because we have more clothes now to keep clean. Indeed, caring for these new clothes is a skill in itself, what with remembering which fabrics favour which methods. The polyester blends are fine if you wash them on warm and shake them out right away, and yes you can wash the acrylic sweater, but no, hey! that t-shirt isn't colorfast . . .

CHAUFFEUR: In the sprawling suburbs, and in rural areas, schools, stores, dentists, churches, community centres, and commuter trains are all too far from home to walk. A jaunt to the milk store may be a five-mile round trip, let alone taking a child to visit a school friend.

Many suburban and rural women spend an hour or more every day, driving someone else somewhere. Often, they have to bundle all the kids into the car every time they want to go out, even for a newspaper.

JANITOR: Who cleans the toilets in your house? Even the most affluent housewives do menial chores, like emptying trash baskets and scrubbing floors.

Bear in mind that the typical housewife juggles all these duties around the times that are convenient to her husband and children (school hours, mealtimes, etc.), and in the midst of their constant interruptions for attention. However, it is the cumulative effect of all these tasks which is the telling factor: adding up the hours. Remember, right now we're talking about a *minimum* standard, strictly housekeeping and childcare. We've barely touched on personal services to the husband, outside employment, involvement in a family business, or other extra duties which often come with the occupation.

Few homemakers bother to keep track of their hours, and scientific observers find it difficult to sort out time-per-task, as tasks tend to overlap. But preliminary figures, just starting to come in, are enough to raise and curl your eyebrows. Here's an example:

HOW MUCH IS A HOUSEWIFE WORTH?

The Average Canadian housewife works 100 hours, and if she were paid for her work she would earn \$204.25 a week.

Times and tasks of an average housewife.
(adapted from Changing Times)

	HOURS per week	PAY per week
Nursemaid	44.5	\$ 2.00
Dietitian	1.2	5.00
Cook	13.1	2.50

Food Buyer	3.3	2.00
Housekeeper	17.5	1.50
Laundress	5.9	2.00
Seamstress	1.3	2.50
Practical Nurse	.6	3.00
Maintenance	1.7	2.00
Gardener	2.3	1.50
Chauffeur	2.0	4.50
	99.6	\$204.25

— from Centre for Women Newsletter,
Humber College (September 1975)

One hundred hours a week sounds like an awful lot of time. It may in fact be rather high; expensive (and rare) sociological time-budget studies give figures of between 50-75 hours per week. Still, all sources show clearly that housewives do put in more than the 40-hour week which is standard for most other workers. By the criterion of work-performed then, home-making must be considered an occupation: a job.

But, some readers may protest, a job is work performed for *money* and housewives work for love. This criticism is not exactly true. Housewives do, usually, love their families; but as workers they are paid in kind rather than in coin, by getting free room and board. Of course, a wife is free to negotiate herself personal money from her husband. However, most housewives feel so badly about "doing nothing, really", that they don't bother.

By the Way—

A major reason to re-evaluate the housewife's role is that until recently her husband's obligation to support her has been legally tied to her obligation to be sexually faithful. Enacted before contraception was reliable or widely available, these restrictions have been largely eliminated from the proposed Ontario Family Law Reform Act. (In this book we will assume that how a woman handles sex in or out of marriage is a private matter between herself and her partner.)

Who Benefits from all this Free Work?

- 1) Our economy is based on mass production. In order for the machines to keep turning out goods profitably, there must be mass consumption. At least a portion of the time that formerly went into producing an item, now goes into selecting it. Housewives who choose, buy, clean, maintain, keep repaired, and finally, replace consumer goods, are the backbone of a mass production economy. Without millions of housewives shopping every day, our economy would collapse. Stores, for instance, obviously rely on the premise that one member of the family is free for shopping during regular business (“working”) hours.
- 2) Big employers have the advantage of a cheap and mobile temporary labour force. During the world wars, women proved their capability as employees, in all fields. Thirty years later, women are still restricted to certain (usually) service occupations, largely barred from career advancement, and paid an average of 40 percent less than men doing the same work. Part-time and temporary jobs (most suited for homemakers) are even cheaper for employers, since they pay few or no fringe benefits. Because housework is unpaid, every other “women’s” job is paid less; and any woman who doesn’t like it can go right back to her kitchen.
- 3) All levels of government are relieved of the responsibility to provide adequate daycare, because most homemakers mind their own children. In our band-aid curative culture, the state’s main recognition of child-raising as a public service, occurs when the state takes a mistreated child away from its family. Public schooling is another pertinent example. True, taxpayers would eventually finance public daycare centres. But presently, politicians benefit because they can afford to ignore the need.
- 4) Husbands receive a measure of personal service otherwise unusual in our servantless society. A man who formerly would have needed his wife’s goodwill in order to share the vegetables, eggs, chickens, and bread she raised, now claims his supper by virtue of having already paid for the commodities. The balance of power within the family has shifted, unevenly. The housewife is increasingly dependent on her husband

(because she produces only services, not goods or income), while the husband is decreasingly dependent on her, because he may view her childcare hours as no service at all to him personally.

- 5) Volunteer work helps many schools, hospitals, churches, and charities to meet their budgets. Housewives are still being pulled into public work through their interest in their children and their communities. Many of our vital public services rely heavily on volunteer workers.
- 6) Children and homemakers themselves may be better off for having the time to savor early childhood. However, to the extent that this is good for children, it is also good for society. And all the evidence suggests that women might enjoy this satisfaction, if they choose, at a lesser personal cost than at present.

Summing Up: Job Duties

“Women often put down their very real talents because those talents are either unpaid or underpaid. But a skill is not a trade requiring advanced study and specialized training. Basically a skill is merely the ability to do something well, with ease and efficiency, in an office or at home, under pressure or in a relaxed atmosphere. Anything from organizing a car pool to managing an office demonstrates a special skill. As simple as it sounds, preparing a breakfast of juice, eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee, and getting everything to the table piping hot requires enormous skill. Skills required for a job are valued more than skills used in a hobby or in homemaking, though they may actually be the same skills.”

— from *Woman's Work Book*, op. cit.

The fact that nominally a housewife draws no pay has led to a popular misconception that a woman at home does not work. Economists and sociologists (mostly male) have tended to overlook the monetary value of a homemaker's contributions; hence, to discount the value of housewifery as an occupation, or job.

Available data, however, show that a housewife spends more hours than most employed people engaged in tasks which, when

performed in the workforce, clearly are jobs. Also, virtually all of these tasks may be done for a fee elsewhere, although daycare is limited. We conclude then, that what a housewife does is work, in the sense that a person holding a job works.

A person holding a job, however, draws a paycheque. A woman working in the home may get great satisfaction from doing work she enjoys. In monetary terms, her only return is the necessities of life. She may be very expensively *kept*, but she is not even cheaply *paid*. Some countries expect all their workers to labour for necessities and love (of the state). In Canada, we expect this only of housewives.



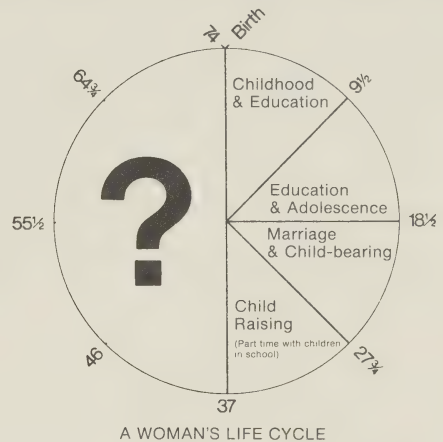
How Modern Women Fit Homemaking Into Their Lives

Other aspects of homemaking have also changed as much in recent decades as the job duties just discussed. Willy-nilly, housewives have had to transform the role in order to suit the circumstances. What usually happens is that an individual woman reacts to a personal situation, and then feels funny about it. Rarely is there a chance for an overview of how social conditions force situations (hence decisions) on women. This is not to imply that every change has been harmful, only that changes have had unforeseen consequences.

For instance, with contraception available, fewer couples are raising large families. As recently as 1961, each Canadian housewife raised an average 3.8 children. By 1973, the average family had 1.9 children. It's ridiculous to talk about .9 of a child, of course. We use the figures only to illustrate that while childcare takes a good many *hours*, it no longer takes very many *years*. In 1900, a housewife was

likely to bear a dozen children and work herself to an early death; so for her, homemaking was a lifetime career. No so anymore. This circle chart shows an average woman's life cycle. Note that with 2 children, she's facing an empty nest by age 37, with *half* her life still ahead of her.

Chart supplied by
Helen Satchell
Sheridan College
Centre for Women



Half a life is a lot of time to fill up. Mind you, we're not complaining. But the realization can be discomfiting when it sort of sneaks up on a body. Some housewives are totally unprepared for the children to leave home so quickly; suddenly they look up and the house is quiet and empty. Conversely, many homemakers are happy to put in 20 years and then relax in semi-retirement. Again, some houseworkers fill empty hours with volunteer work for charities and social agencies. An increasing trend is for women to plan both families and careers, dropping out of the labour force for childbirth and raising, with full intentions of returning in a few months or years.

Sometimes the gap is filled by active involvement in the spouse's career. All housewives contribute indirectly to their husbands' careers by taking over their household and childcare responsibilities. (If the wives did not do it, the husbands would have to pay somebody, or else take time away from their other work). Some wives contribute to their husbands' careers directly. A doctor or lawyer's wife may have worked to put him through school. A professor's wife often types up his manuscripts. A businessman's wife entertains important clients, and may move her household

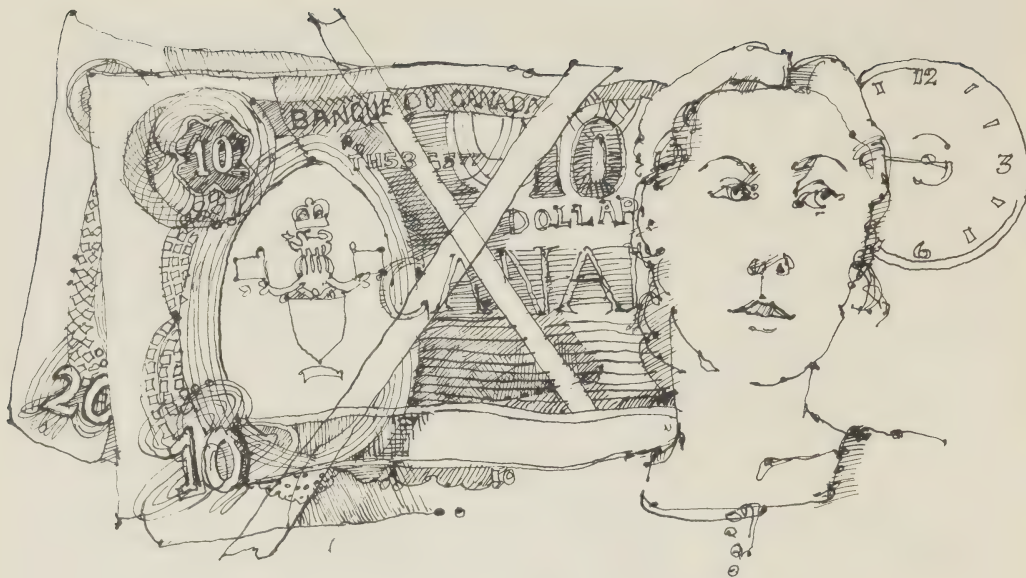
frequently as he's transferred. Wives often partner their husbands in small business ventures, such as stores and restaurants.

The farm woman, for instance, never lacks for something to do. Farm families tend to be larger than their urban counterparts, and to have less money for spending on appliances and consumer goods. The farm wife often keeps her own garden and livestock, to help feed her family. She pitches in on farm chores when needed . . . not so often as 50 years ago, perhaps, because machines have taken over the heaviest work. Although a farm woman may still be involved in clearing fields or barn raising, today her contribution to farm operation is usually keeping the accounts and managing the finances. Farming is a real business arrangement now, and farmers must keep detailed records of production, sales, and expenses.

Women rarely receive a salary for the work they do on the farm. If the wife is paid a wage, her husband may not deduct her pay from his taxes as a business expense (nor may he in any small-business partnership). If the same woman does the same work for a neighbour, that farmer may claim the amount as a business expense. Here again, we have a situation where work done by women in their own homes is denied the status given the same job when performed elsewhere.

Here too we have an example of why women should appraise their own worth and then correct their partnership (marriage) arrangements to reflect reality. Most Canadians became aware of the hard reality for farm wives in 1973, when the Supreme Court of Canada handed down the now infamous "Murdoch decision." Irene Murdoch worked hard to build up the ranch she and her husband ran in Alberta. She managed the farm single-handedly when her husband was away working for other ranchers, and sometimes joined him in these money-making ventures. The couple were paid one salary for two people's work. The money was paid to the husband, since he was supposedly "head of the household". The money went through his hands, and the property was put in his name. When the couple separated, Irene Murdoch found she was not entitled to any of the ranch land she had helped purchase. The Court ruled her contribution was only that of an "ordinary ranch wife." She received a stingy \$200 a month support order during

separation, which was slightly improved by a divorce settlement of approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the farm's appraised value.



Occupational Hazards

Speaking of divorce, a housewife's job security isn't so great anymore as many Canadian marriages now end in divorce. Any man who's still making support payments to an ex-wife after 10 years of separation will swear that divorce settlements are unfair to men. On the other hand, the Federal Law Reform Commission estimates that there is some degree of default in up to 75 percent of all court-order support payments.

Consider:

- 10.0% of Canadian families are headed by a single parent
- 85.5% of single parent families are headed by a woman
- 59.6% of these mother-led families live below the poverty line.

Here, in the extreme case, it is quite evident how valuable a homemaker is. For a housewife simply cannot afford to pay for replacement of her own services, if she needs to find a job. (This relates to women's lower wages too). Small wonder that so many spouse-less mothers of young children end up drawing Family Benefits Allowances. (FBA).

It is incredibly difficult for the mother of young children to become financially independent, especially when she has to start out from scratch all over again. The support services which would allow her to enter the workforce (daycare, housekeeping, counselling) simply do not exist in most communities. Being poor is terribly stressful. Poverty is bad for the nerves, bad for the health, bad for the children, and bad for friendships. Worst of all, a woman drawing FBA is actually penalized for earning extra money. She may earn up to \$25 a week any way she can, but any more than that, and the province withholds \$.75 from her cheque for each dollar she earns.

“I went on welfare when my first husband walked out on me. I was swimming alone, completely cuckoo for a while. When I married this second man, I got off it. When he started drinking and bringing home no money, I had to quit my job and go on welfare again. I got something with this welfare business and I don’t like it . . .

“I start my day here at five o’clock. I get up and prepare all the (5) children’s clothes. If there’s shoes to shine, I do it in the morning. About seven o’clock I bathe the children. I leave my baby with the babysitter and I go to work at the settlement house. I work until twelve o’clock . . . When I get back, I try to make hot food for the kids to eat. In the afternoon it’s pretty well on my own. I scrub and cook and clean and do whatever I have to do . . .

“Welfare makes you feel like you’re doing nothing. Like you’re laying back and not doing anything and it’s falling in your lap. But you must understand, mothers, too, work. My house is clean. I’ve been scrubbing since this morning. You could check my clothes, all washed and ironed. I’m home and I’m working. I am a working mother . . .

“I’m working now, I’m pulling my weight, I’m gonna get off welfare in time, that’s my goal — get off . . . I would like to help mothers be aware of how they can give to the community. Not the whole day — maybe three, four hours. And get paid for it. There’s nothing more proud for you to receive a cheque where you worked at. It’s yours, you done it.”

— from *Working* op. cit. Jesusita Navarro
“Just a housewife”

Another disadvantage of working in the home is that one has no personal claim on the Canada Pension Plan. (Indeed, a strong argument can be made that a houseworker never has the option of retiring; she merely graduates to having her husband at home instead of her children). Currently a housewife is not even allowed to make *voluntary* contributions to the CPP, assuming she could afford them. If she were self-employed, she'd be *required* to make payments. If she drew a cheque from an employer, they'd both be required to pay up. Not making pension plan payments means that the stay-at-home spouse may be denied a pension if divorced from the breadwinner, or (in some cases) if the paid-up spouse dies first. Many remedies have been suggested, and some are in effect. A breadwinner may save tax money by contributing to a Registered Retirement Savings Plan for the stay-at-home spouse. The Canada Pension Plan has recently approved an amendment allowing pension credits to be evenly split in event of marriage dissolution. Another pending CPP provision will allow homemakers to "drop out" of the work force for childraising, without lowering their pension plan credits.

Next to support payments and pensions, vacation pay might not seem very important — but housewives don't get that either. A housewife who takes care of the kids on family vacation gets no vacation herself. Thousands of women go up to the cottage every summer and continue the same daily tasks as at home. Nor do they benefit from statutory holidays. Moreover, housewives face restricted access to recreational facilities. Organized activities for women tend to be given lower priority than activities for men or children, and to be scheduled around the other groups' convenience.

We conclude then, that housewives lose out, compared with other workers, as regards job security and time off work. Other occupational hazards are more difficult to identify. We know, for instance, that twice as many tranquilizers are prescribed for women as for men; but it is hard to tell how much of this difference is due to women's homemaking roles, and how much due to medical attitudes towards women. We also know that most accidents happen in the home, which is grounds for wondering how safe the home is as a work area. For instance, it has been shown that liquid

drain cleaners and aerosol oven cleaners are prone to splash back into the user's eyes, which can cause blindness. However, the health hazards most strongly linked with homemaking are probably psychological.

“The same technology which has reduced the physical burden of housekeeping has also contributed to the increasing social isolation of the housewife. If most of the major functions of housekeeping can be performed within one's own home, institutionalized contacts with other adults will dwindle. An unprecedented loneliness is likely to confront women, each of whom perform their daily chores in daily parallel action, each action of which is increasingly less crucial for well-being of the adults of the family, since easily available for purchase . . .”

— from *The Industrialization of Housework*
by Margrit Eichler

“Therapists need to inform female clients that many of the problems women experience are societal in origin and that society continues to exert pressures likely to maintain such conflicts. This is necessary both to maintain such conflicts. and to increase women's awareness of the need to seek social as well as personal change.”

— from *Women Look at Psychiatry*
essay: “Becoming a Non-sexist Therapist”
by Sara David

Housewives are often subject to agoraphobia (often called “housewife's syndrome”), which is a fear of leaving home and being among other people. Also common among homemakers is very low self-esteem. Women who work in the home may often be shy in social situations, or doubt their own abilities in problem-solving. In all this, they are mainly reflecting the image forced on them by the larger society. Canadians may praise motherhood highly but, in general, they don't think much of housewives; and consequently, housewives don't think much of themselves.

Dual Roles — Dual Jobs?

“. . . according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, married women can expect to spend an average of twenty-five years

in the labor market, unmarried women forty-six years, and men, married or single, forty-five years. Any way you look at it, twenty-five to forty-six years is not a brief romp.”

— from, *Woman's Work Book*

“The husband's contribution to household tasks does not alter appreciably when the wife has a paying job. Husbands, on the average, increase their participation in the housework by one hour per week when their wives are in the labour force. A husband's total work load, including housework and paid job, varies little whether his wife works at a paying job full-time or part-time, but the total work load of a wife is consistently heavier when she is employed full-time.”

— from *Opportunity for Choice* ed. by Gail Cook
(pub. by C. D. Howe Institute in association with
Statistics Canada)
essay, “Work Patterns” by Morley Gunderson

Between 1966 and 1976 the percentage of all Ontario women in the labour force increased from 38.3% to 48.9%. In 1975, 47% of Ontario married women, and roughly 40% of Ontario mothers were working outside their homes. There is a growing trend towards women arranging their lives so they can have both family life and workforce activity; although whether they hold jobs from choice or necessity is a moot point.

What interests us here is that women are beginning to enjoy dual job/home roles, as men have always done. However, a few pitfalls await employed housewives. Firstly, options for women in the labour force are still limited, and women are still paid an average of 60 percent of men's wages. Secondly, the housewife is more likely than her spouse to encounter real conflict between paid work and her family duties. Unemployment Insurance and company maternity leaves are so complicated and restrictive as to be a real problem for the average working woman. She also risks being burdened with dual jobs, if the rest of her family doesn't pitch in on housekeeping chores. Thirdly, a homemaker is likely to be out of the labour force for 10 years or more before returning, her rusty skills making re-entry more difficult.

One good solution to two of these problems is part-time work — for

those who can find it. Holding a job for a few hours each week allows a homemaker to keep her job skills sharp during childraising years, and to ease back into full employment when she has more free time. However, business and union policies have combined to minimize part-time opportunities. Unions sometimes write right into contracts that part-time jobs will be limited, and no full-time jobs may be split up for part-time workers. Businesses treat part-time workers as casual labour, not eligible for promotion or benefits, even though the same person may hold one job for several years. This attitude prevails despite the experts who say that part-time work is the wave of the future. It is unrealistic, they say, to expect the 40-hour work week to survive automation; 20 hours a week may soon be the norm for all employees, men and women alike.

“The time will come, we hope, when women will be economically free and mentally and spiritually independent enough to refuse to have their food paid for by men, when women will receive equal pay for equal work, and have all avenues of activity open to them; and will be free to choose their own mates, without shame or indelicacy; when men will not be afraid of marriage because of the financial burden, but free men and free women will marry for love, and together work for the sustenance of their families. It is not too ideal a thought. It is coming, and the new movement among women who are crying out for a larger humanity, is going to bring it about.”

— from *In Times Like These* by Nellie McClung

“Most of my girlfriends are still single, and some are planning to be married or actually arranging their weddings. It scares the living daylights out of me. They’re planning their weddings, receptions, and honeymoons so carefully, but they haven’t given one thought to what they’re going to do after. I ask them:

‘Where are you going to live?’	‘I don’t know.’
‘Are you going to work?’	‘I don’t know.’
‘What kind of birth control are you going to use?’	‘I don’t know.’

“It’s horrifying. Their weddings are going to be the climax of their lives, and everything that comes after is going to be

downhill. It's as if they're planning their funerals instead of their weddings."

— women interviewed by Thorpe and Blake in
Wives: an Investigation

Funny, it doesn't sound like a job offer when a man says, "Will you marry me?" And in the world Nellie McClung envisioned, a world that may be upon us any decade now, marriage would not be women's employment; but a partnership of equals. Of course, every couple can work towards this ideal even now. Women who have been married for a long while might find it difficult to change their husbands' attitudes; but women just entering marriage can and should profit by writing their own contracts.

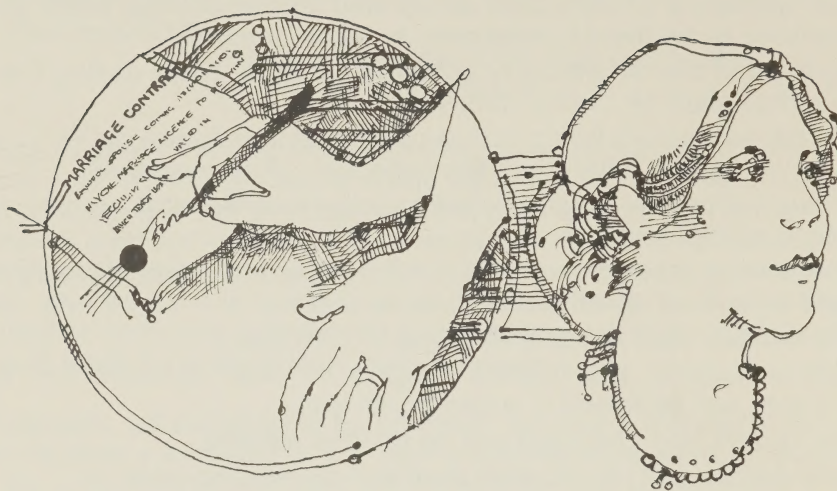
Incidentally, *all* marriage is by contract. Signing a marriage license is more than a formality. It's a legally-binding agreement to abide by the provincial family laws. Similarly, marriage is inevitably a business arrangement, because partners share funds and possessions. The standard marriage license that most couples sign looks innocent enough, but behind it lurks enough fine print to fuddle judges.

The Ontario Attorney-General has proposed legislative changes that would allow private marriage contracts. Previously, such agreements were deemed to be against the public interest, in the fear that even regarding separation from a distance would bring it on. While it may appear cold-blooded for a couple to work out their business arrangements before marriage, it certainly is more sensible than waiting for marriage breakdown to get a crash course in family law.

A woman who intends to work mainly in the home has special considerations in drawing up her own contract. The standard marriage still emphasizes sexual fidelity and ignores homemaking as an economic contribution. In a private contract, a housewife could require her spouse to provide her with pension funds (RRSP, CPP, or savings), and to hold all property jointly. A farm wife might want to spell out her claim to the family acres. The possibilities are endless. Here's a list of suggestions, from which to pick and choose.

- Full disclosure of individual assets, and agreement that these shall continue to be owned separately by each person.
- Agreement that all property acquired by either party during the marriage shall be owned jointly.
- Neither party shall be forced to pay present or future debts incurred by the other (with the exception of necessities).
- An arbitrator may be appointed by mutual agreement for any future marital disputes.
- The woman takes responsibility for birth control, and reserves the right to end an unwanted pregnancy.
- The woman retains her own name in marriage.
- Neither partner will impose religion on their children (or, the children will be raised in a particular faith).
- Housework and childcare will be divided equally.
- Both parties will continue to pursue individual careers.
- Each partner may take two weeks vacation a year alone, if desired.
- Should one partner have to relocate for business purposes, the other is under no obligation to follow.
- Decision-making shall be shared equally.
- A partner engaged in child-raising or studying will be supported by the other.
- If childcare is not shared equally, then the employed spouse will contribute a certain sum every year to a savings account or pension fund in the stay-at-home partner's name.
- If both work, half of each income is the property of both during the marriage.
- If the marriage ends, both partners will continue to support the children. The partner with custody of the children will allow the other partner reasonable access.
- If the marriage ends, both partners will split all their Canada Pension Plan credits evenly.
- Either partner may initiate review and revision of this contract at any time, as the relationship grows and changes.
- The spouse who stays home to look after the children shall receive a designated sum, or a percentage of the family income, for her personal use, to save or spend as she/he pleases.

he??

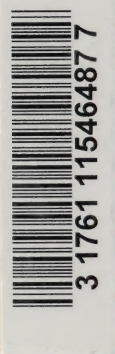


Summing Up: Occupation, Housewife

Depending on your viewpoint, housewifery is either the best bargain going or the biggest rip off. One has to admire the amount that housewives contribute (to their families, society and Canada's GNP) but also wonder at their poor bargaining abilities. Workers in most other occupations are protected by laws and union contracts, as to hours, wages, pensions, and working conditions. Housewives have been left behind in a feudal barter arrangement, defined by family rather than labour laws.

Although the society surrounding it is rigid, homemaking is a fairly flexible occupation. With a small family of 2 or 3 children (which is becoming the norm), full-time homemaking may last only 10 or 12 years, leaving time for other pursuits. A fairly high percentage of married women and mothers now hold jobs outside the home. But for a woman who works from necessity, the combination of jobs and household duties can be overwhelming.

The proposed Family Law Reform Act, recognizing a couple's right to a privately-drawn marriage contract, would allow housewives to negotiate for occupational advantages which they now lack.



Fifth in a series of reports aimed at improving the status of women in Ontario.

About Face

Towards a positive image of women in textbooks

Volte-Face

Vers une image positive de la femme dans les manuels scolaires

About Face II

Towards a positive image of women in advertising

About Face III

Towards a positive image of women in sport

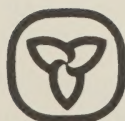
About Face IV

Is anybody out there listening?

About Face V

Towards a positive image of housewives

List of Resources for Women who Work in the Home is available by writing to Ontario Status of Women Council, 801 Bay St., 3rd Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1Z1.



Ontario